

# Much Needed Miracles of Communication

*A sermon on Acts 2: 1-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 May 2024*

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## Message

The Holy Spirit, poured out on the church, opens pathways of communication, breaking down barriers to enable us to communicate with one another and with God.

## Sermon

I have a friend who belongs to a Pentecostal church, who once made the comment that he hates Pentecost Sunday, because in Pentecostal Churches they can't think of anything to do that they didn't already do every other Sunday! Well, we're not a Pentecostal church, and our still fairly young tradition of praying in languages we don't know well has certainly given us a playful and celebratory way of making this Sunday stand out from the rest.

But I still do have a bit of a problem when it comes to preaching on this day, because the biblical story of that first Pentecost touches on things that have become very problematic in the churches. A lot of the big church fights of the last fifty years or so have been over how we understand the role of the Holy Spirit, and especially over the place of what is known as "the gift of speaking in tongues".

It is somewhat ironic that a story which is in essence about the breaking down of barriers to communication, should provoke reactions which themselves become major barriers to communication between Christian peoples. I have no intention of trying to sort out the disputes today. I do hope that what I have to say will not exacerbate any of them, but might help open some lines of communication between us and God, and between us and each other.

Whatever else might be said about the story from the Acts of the Apostles of the church's first Day of Pentecost, the one thing that is quite clear is that the primary miracle that the Spirit of God enables here is one of breaking through the communication barriers. People who could not understand because of language barriers, hear and understand, and God's message breaks through to people who otherwise could not have heard it.

Whether the miracle happens in the voice box of the speaker or the eardrums of the hearer or both doesn't matter (both are implied by the text). Either way, it is a miracle, something that could not have happened if God's Holy Spirit had not intervened and allowed something new and different to happen. And it would appear from what Jesus said in the gospel reading that this is pretty much one of the standard areas of business for the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "The Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, will testify on my behalf, and you also are to testify." Testifying, getting the truth across, communicating. This is the task of the Spirit, and it becomes our task, in response to the Spirit.

And when it happens it is miraculous, because there are so many barriers to genuine communication, especially when it comes to communication about the deep issues of life and meaning and spirit. Jesus spoke many times about the difficulty of getting the message through. He usually used the metaphor of blindness for it, describing his mission as opening the eyes of the blind, and although this was sometimes a physical blindness, most of the time he was dealing with those whose eyes were OK but who just could not or would not see. As he

said to those who believed they were in the know in a passage we read just a few weeks ago, “If you were blind, you’d have an excuse, but since you claim you can see, you stand condemned.”

We have story after story of Jesus trying to get his disciples to understand what he was on about, only to have them misunderstand again and again. Communication, especially once you get beyond the superficialities, is a tough job with a relatively low success rate, and even Jesus had only occasional breakthroughs.

No doubt every one of you knows the feeling of trying to make your point to someone and you can see that it’s just not getting through. You know the sense of frustration that rises up and up as you try different tacks in an attempt to get them to see it your way, and nothing seems to work.

Or perhaps you know that sinking feeling when you’re dealing with someone who has such a negative view of themselves that they seem to be able to manufacture an insult out of anything you say, so when ever you have something to say you spend about half an hour planning your line so as to eliminate any possible way they could turn it into a put down, but they still find a way. Another communication failure.

Paradoxically, we live in an era when communication has become easier than ever and harder than ever at the same time. Nowadays, if you are travelling in a country where the people speak a different language from you, you can use an app on your phone as a translator. You simply open the app and talk in English, and the phone will speak out loud what you wanted to say in the other language. Then the other person answers, and your phone will speak it back to you in English. And if you have to read a sign or a menu or something, you open the app and point your camera at the text, and you will see it translated on your screen in real time. It’s never been easier.

But at the same time, communication has become harder than ever. In large part due to the silo effect of social media algorithms, more and more people seldom read, hear or engage with the opinions of anyone outside their own social bubble and so become less and less capable of considering or even tolerating differing perspectives or worldviews. It can become terrifying to say anything that questions the increasingly compulsory orthodoxies of our in-groups. The examples are endless, but here are a couple of obvious recent ones.

After my sermon a couple of weeks back about domestic violence, some of you referred me to the opinion piece in the newspaper by Waleed Aly. I read it and was flattered that any of you thought that what I’d said was anywhere near as good as what he said, but I also read some of the thousands of online comments in response to his article. His main point was that the assumption that has underpinned Australia’s strategies to reduce domestic violence has been that the violence is caused by disrespect for women, but there is no research evidence to support the assumption, and ten years of campaigning to improve respect for women has not produced any reduction in domestic violence.

Well, reading the furious online feedback, you’d think he had said that disrespect for women was a good thing and should be maintained! In fact, his point was that these two evils – disrespect for women and violence towards women – might be independent evils with no causal relationship between them and which therefore need to be tackled separately. But in a

world that demands that you be all in for one side or the other, any questioning of what “we” are thinking or doing is too often misunderstood and treated as treason.

This is writ even larger and more dangerously in the conversations about the actions of the Israeli Defence Forces in Gaza. We easily find ourselves feeling herded into one camp or the other by those around us, and then find ourselves in a space where it is dangerous to ask out loud whether there may be some truth on the other side and some fault on ours. If you have Jewish friends who have spoken up against the apparently genocidal actions of the IDF, ask them how risky and alienating that has felt in their community. And similarly, it would be a brave member of the current student-led pro-Palestinian protests who could express out loud any sympathy for Israelis over the trauma inflicted on them on October 7<sup>th</sup>.

Psychologists often talk about the way we tend to hear every thing through the filters of our previous experience. They reckon it doesn’t matter what you say to me, I’ll only hear the stuff that I have categories for in my head, and so what I think you meant will be a sort of combination between what you actually said and what I already believed or wanted to hear. The social media algorithms amplify this enormously by feeding us more and more similar content so that the categories in our heads get narrower and narrower and we increasingly lose our capacities to hear and make sense of anything different.

Sometimes there is an element of choice at play too because what I want to hear acts as a filter too. I most readily hear what I perceive as being in my own interests. Most of us are quite good at filtering out information that threatens our comfort zones or calls for change. All of you who’ve ever been in psychotherapy can no doubt attest to how much effort it takes to stop defending yourself and start actually listening to things that call you to make significant changes. I’m sure you know that experience.

Whether it’s pride that refuses to acknowledge that I might not be up to standard, or fear that would rather stay in familiar places even if they’re the pits, or individualism that refuses to entrust myself to anyone else, or self-preoccupation that can’t afford to look at how my behaviour impacts on others, or image consciousness that couldn’t face the world without the trappings, the nice things, the fashionable accessories.

Whatever it may be, every one of us has things that block our ears and refuse to allow the Word of God through to our core where it might challenge and cut and rearrange. Every one of us has areas where we’ve inoculated ourselves to the claims of Jesus on our lives, and nothing short of a miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit will open up our ears and enable us to hear God’s word in our own tongue.

This is no less true of us here in the church as it is in the streets outside or in your social media feed. It may even be worse here at times, because to all the barriers we share with the world outside, we have the added problem of over-familiarity. We hear the stories which we’ve heard before, and after a while we just allow them to wash over us without ever penetrating. “Jesus was crucified to death for me.” Yeah, yeah I know that. “Jesus says give up all you have and follow me.” Yeah, Yeah, I know that. And we think we have responded sufficiently because we are sitting here, hearing the same things yet again, allowing the same startling truths and claims to slide on past without really touching us.

We need pentecostal flames of fire to fall on us and burn through the barriers before anything is going to get through. We need the Holy Spirit to come like a howling wind, blasting the cobwebs out of our hearts and minds and breathing new life into our world-weary souls. And when that happens, when the word gets through, either because the Spirit gave you different words or gave me opened ears, then that's a miracle, and that's the kind of business God is in.

Look don't despair on this stuff. If you're feeling right now that you know what I mean and you really want to allow God's word in to do its work in your heart and mind, but you just don't know how to get the barriers down, then pray. It's actually not your job to get the barriers down. Your part is just to give permission and get out of the way while the Spirit does what the Spirit does.

It is in prayer that you will find yourself able to give permission. Pray. Ask God's Spirit to do it. Plead with God to break you open and to strip off all the gunk that blocks your ears and clags your soul. God will. Maybe not immediately, maybe not in one spectacular moment, but God will, if you really want it and keep asking for it.